



Early Journal Content on JSTOR, Free to Anyone in the World

This article is one of nearly 500,000 scholarly works digitized and made freely available to everyone in the world by JSTOR.

Known as the Early Journal Content, this set of works include research articles, news, letters, and other writings published in more than 200 of the oldest leading academic journals. The works date from the mid-seventeenth to the early twentieth centuries.

We encourage people to read and share the Early Journal Content openly and to tell others that this resource exists. People may post this content online or redistribute in any way for non-commercial purposes.

Read more about Early Journal Content at <http://about.jstor.org/participate-jstor/individuals/early-journal-content>.

JSTOR is a digital library of academic journals, books, and primary source objects. JSTOR helps people discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content through a powerful research and teaching platform, and preserves this content for future generations. JSTOR is part of ITHAKA, a not-for-profit organization that also includes Ithaka S+R and Portico. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

We are summoned, then, to break with a venerable tradition, one deeply entrenched in our religious education and life. We are challenged to treat the Bible in the light of our highest revelation of truth. We are called by the joint authority of the Master and of our own unprejudiced reason to discard his name from our standard or else to discard from our standard whatever does not accord with him and his message. The Great Alternative is this: the present standard of the church or

the Christian standard—which? The Bible in its entirety belongs, not in the pulpit and not in the Sunday school and not in the missionary field, but on the library shelf and on the table of the student of religions; the story of the Master and his message, together with those strains of the former and the later writings which are of a kindred spirit and which work to the same end, these must be recognized as the Christian standard, the Bible for a brightening future.

THE RELIGION OF CHILDHOOD. V

HENRY B. ROBINS, PH.D.

Professor in the Rochester Theological Seminary
Rochester, New York

VIII. Individuality and the Nurture Process

Though we have talked of "the child" throughout this discussion, "the child" is, after all, but an abstraction. What real life presents to us is not "the child" but children, as various, as different, as the blades of grass in the meadow or the leaves in the forest. We can never do our best for them until we understand how different they are. But when the significance of individuality dawns upon us we shall gladly recognize the differences and stop applying to childhood a single religious prescription.

Much as environment has to do with the making of the individual, children do not absolutely conform thereto; there is an active inner self tending ever to differentiate from all others. An excel-

lent illustration is afforded by a recent autobiographical account of "A Small Boy's Newspaper":

My father argued Republicanism and I at once became a Republican. A friend decried yellow journalism and I at once became conservative in my newspaper management. My grandmother pondered much over the spiritualistic significance of dreams. I became interested in dreams. So it was with every early life-influence. Yet I became something more than a mere echo of my environment. My Republicanism was not exactly like my father's. I was not half so conservative as my friend, and my dream ponderings soon became scientific instead of spiritualistic. My small germ of "original nature" and my gradual accumulation of experience combined to modify each imitation into a half-original creation.¹

¹ *Pedagogical Seminary*, XXIV, 180-203.

This fact of individuality is greatly emphasized by a comparison of members of the same family, brothers and sisters. In the instance just cited, what was the predominating influence in the subject's boyhood made slight appeal to his elder brother and almost none to an elder sister.

Individuality must mean for the religious life of the race what it has meant in the broader social field, especially in art, literature, invention, and the technical pursuits. We now appreciate, as once we did not, how greatly the whole life of the race has been enriched by the development of individual aptitudes, points of view, etc. How much a dull conformity to some single pattern would have lost to us! In the realm of religion it is just those who have realized this freedom to be themselves who have become humanity's prophets and seers. We should expect a technique of religious nurture which pays a great deal of attention to individual differences to contribute largely to the total religious outcome.

But there is a more urgent reason why individuality must be regarded by the nurture process, and it lies just in the fact that individual differences are the necessary clue to the needs of the individual himself. Not only are there certain common traits of childhood which the nurture process must recognize as the clue to childish needs at a particular stage, but there are throughout childhood growing individual differences which indicate differences of treatment. Every mother of a family recognizes these differences in her own children, but by no means every mother understands how important they are in relation to religious nurture.

Educators recognize increasingly the very real problem which the fact of individual differences presents to the public school. Even though the teacher were able to note these differences in her pupils and to appreciate their meaning, which would be a long step in advance, how could she ever find the time to deal with each pupil separately upon the basis of those differences? What more can she do than strike an average and hold the bright pupils back while she speeds up the dull ones? Variation in mental traits covers the whole field of attention, memory, rate of learning, etc. Professor Thorndike makes the range of such variation concrete in such a statement as this:

There can be little doubt that of a thousand ten-year-olds taken at random, some will be four times as energetic, industrious, quick, courageous, or honest as others, or will possess four times as much refinement, knowledge of arithmetic, power of self-control, sympathy, or the like. It has been found that amongst children of the same age and, in essential respects, of the same home training and school advantages, some do in the same time six times as much, or do the same amount with only one-tenth as many errors [*Individuality*, pp. 7 f.].

Of the significance of this fact of individuality in general, the same writer says:

All the sciences and arts of controlling human nature must accept the original variety of human nature as a condition for thought and action. The economist must not consider men as all seeking with steadfast rationality to buy as cheap and sell as dear as they can. The religious worker should not hope to arouse uniformly the same sense of guilt and longing for justification to which he and his intimates testify. . . . The teacher who has not learned by

ordinary experience that each child is to some extent a separate problem, demanding for his best interest an educational theory and practice to fit him, should learn it once for all from psychological theory [p. 50].

Let us make the application to the processes of religious nurture. In their endeavors to help children to religious reality and experience parents and teachers in the Sunday school have quite usually been guided by what their religious group accepted as standard—the preconfirmation discipline, or the catechism plus a “conversion” experience, for example. They are right in the belief that they should not leave the whole issue to the influence of example and environment, and they are right in their endeavor to do something adequate and thus to standardize their effort, but they have often been mistaken both in the standard accepted—a standard which quite usually ignored the difference between childhood and maturity—and in the failure to adapt the standard to individual needs. We need to awaken to the fact that, in religion as in secular education, “each child is to some extent a separate problem, demanding for his best interest a . . . theory and practice to fit him.”

The fault with us has been in divorcing religion from life. We have supposed that the child could have a religious experience quite unconditioned by his interests, his habits, his imagination and self-control, his excellences or deficiencies in conduct. But, as a matter of fact, all of these very closely condition any religious experience he may have; they are not merely preconditions, they are concurrent conditions; they enter, indeed, into the very

fiber of that experience and give color and meaning to it.

One of the chief reasons why we of the non-liturgical churches particularly have so divorced religion from life has lain in our common view that children cannot be actually participant in religion until they are “converted.” We have not understood that the very term “conversion” implies a fixed character from which the subject now turns away, and that, in the adult sense, no child has such a character. Even in early or middle adolescence, when the “conversion” experience for certain reasons not here to be enumerated becomes common, there is no such fixed character. Adolescence is “yeasty,” variable, at best working only toward the affirmation and fixing of certain ideals which together will in the end constitute a fixed character. It should not be inferred that the writer does not believe in conversion. The point which is at issue here is that the term properly applies to a type of adult experience in which there is a radical turning away from a settled habit of life which is unworthy to a new and superior ideal of life; as such the adult experience usually involves a more or less radical break with certain settled habits, and thus a cataclysm.

Psychologically the term “conversion” does not apply to the ordinary religious experience of childhood, and it cannot. The most that can come to a child at the end of childhood is an experience which amounts to a radical break with a past social situation whereby the habit-forming process is directed toward new and higher ideals, or an unconsciously imitative adoption of some adult’s experience with an endeavor to reproduce it. No child can

have, in the adult sense, an original experience of conversion. As a matter of fact, not all adults have any such radical experience; for the less their settled habit of life needs to be altered to accommodate itself to the new Christian allegiance, the less abrupt and difficult will their transition to the confessedly Christian status become. There has been positive harm and limitation in effectiveness in the technique of dealing with adults, because individuality has been so much disregarded, character and habit so much overlooked, on the assumption that some marked and radical type of experience is the inviolable rule in religious adjustment. But if this notion has been mischievous in the realm of adult religion, where the criterion should be just the fact of adjustment itself and not the special means by which it can best be attained in a given case, it has been much more mischievous in the realm of childhood religion.

In childhood we are still at the stage of formation rather than that of reformation, and it will be a great liberation if we can come to recognize that every positive, constructive process by which right habits, right affections, right ideas, and positive affirmations of good can be built into the life is in so far an element in a truly religious experience. This sets us free to ask, not whether the particular child in question has had some special experience or public humiliation and declaration, but the more general question whether the nurture process is going right—a question which can be answered only by considering his life in detail.

Here is a child, for example, who accepts the religious ideas presented as

a matter of course (and most children do), but whose attitude toward parental authority is increasingly one of petulance and temper—could we for a moment suppose that an adequate method of religious nurture which quietly went on with the process of instruction and overlooked the growing fault in conduct? Not for a moment! Religion will therefore have to do largely with concrete particular habits and tendencies toward habit all through childhood and very little with the affirmation of any generalized ideal.

As a matter of fact the child has but small ability to generalize an ideal and but little interest in those which it may be able partially to generalize; but children have a real and very great appreciation of particular acts, gifts, and graces which fit into their experience. Good and bad always mean to them particular good and bad things, not good and bad in the abstract; and just so, the good and bad in their lives are particular and concrete. It is this growing habit of evasion, of bad temper, or procrastination, of lying, or that growing habit of thoughtfulness, reverence, helpfulness, obedience, and the like with which parent or teacher must deal. And no such dealing can be generalized. There is no rule of thumb by which the tendency from which it springs can be dealt with and repressed or fostered, as the case may be. Only by a loving, patient, persistent search for the springs of the child's growing individuality, which by the grace of God makes him different from all other children, can the best-equipped parent or teacher carry forward helpfully the process of religious nurture.

This is just to say that the test of a child's progress in religion is none of the standard tests at all, if taken by itself—not his ability in the catechism, not his attendance at Sunday school, much less any public expression of religious conviction or faith; the test is the more subtle one of determining how far the forces which play upon him and come to expression in him are integrating within him the groundwork of a wholesome life. His progress cannot be measured by the progress of another child, even within the same family. He has the right to be understood and directed in the light of his own individuality; though there are, to be sure, certain basic ideas and habitual reactions which are as fundamental as A B C, we should seek the clue to his direction in himself. The nurture process lays hold

upon him, not to reduce him to some dull uniformity, but to discover and direct to adequate expression the latent qualities of his own selfhood.

There is no substitute for sympathetic companionship between the child and his parents and teachers, for only continuous fellowship can make possible the insight which a proper respect for individuality demands, and the love and respect which condition the child's response to all effort in his behalf. Such sympathetic fellowship takes time, more time than most fathers and mothers give, far more time than our schemes of religious education usually provide. The more pronounced the individuality which is in process of formation, the more essential the social discipline of firm but loving companionship in order that individuality may not become eccentricity.